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Some reflections upon how writers learn to write are presented in an analogy with learning to swim, offering implications for the teaching of composition. The "simplicity" of the act of writing is contrasted with the "complexity" discovered by literary analysis. Two of the author's poems are used as examples. (AF)

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Writing the Australian Crawl

WILLIAM STAFFORD

OUR DAUGHTER KIT, six years old, stands by the lighted dashboard talking to Daddy as he drives home from a family trip to the beach. The others have gone to sleep, and Kit is helping—she talks to keep me awake. The road winds ahead, and she bubbles along, composing with easy strokes, imagining a way of life for the two of us.

We'd have a old car, the kind that gets flat tires, but inside would be wolfskin on the seats and warm fur on the steering wheel, and wolf fur on all the buttons. And we'd live in a ranch house made out of logs with a loft where you sleep, and you'd walk a little ways and there'd be the farm with the horses. We'd drive to town, and we'd have flat tires, and be sort of old.

This artless bit of talk is a cue for my main contention that the writer, like the talker who finds his best subject and responds eagerly with his whole self, can easily pour out a harmonious passage; writing, like talk, can be easy, fast, and direct; it can come about through the impulsive following of interest, and its form and proportion can grow from itself in a way that appears easy and natural.

To some teachers this contention of mine is weak; but as a teacher and writer I want to mark as clearly as possible a difference with some of my colleagues. Often when my friends pronounce responsibly about the values of creative work I experience a subversive loss of contact. I want at such times to voice what may appear to be an antagonism, maybe even a willful stupidity, about "culture." To "learn the tools of writing," to "understand the essentials of the craft," to "base my practice on models that have proved to be fundamentally sound"—these apparently winsome and admirable phrases put me into a bleak mood. When I write, grammar is my enemy; the materials of my craft come at me in a succession of emergencies in which my feelings are ambivalent; I do not have any commitments, just opportunities. Not the learning of methods, not the broadening of culture, not even the preserving of civilization (there may be greater things than civilizations), but a kind of dizzying struggle with the Now-ness of experience, that is my involvement in writing. And I believe it is this interaction between imagination and its embodiment as it develops which sustains the speaker and the writer—and sustains the artist in other materials.

It is strange to me that as English teachers we have come to accept the idea that the language is primarily learned as speech, is soaked up by osmosis from society by children—but that we then assume the writing down of this flexible language requires a study of linguistics, a systematic checking with lists of standard practices, and so on. Now I realize that our antennae quiver in various ways at this topic: we possess many canned arguments about prescription versus description, and we share many nuances, having written and taught; but I want to take a definite position as a writer, and my main plea is for the value of an unafraid, face-down, flailing and speedy process in using the language. Hence my title, "Writing the Australian Crawl."

Author of a book of poetry TRAVELING THROUGH THE DARK (Harper & Row, 1962), *Mr. Stafford is a member of the English department at Lewis and Clark College.*

Just as any reasonable person who looks at water, and passes his hand through it, can see that it would not hold a person up; so it is the judgment of commonsense people that reliance on the weak material of students' experiences cannot possibly sustain a work of literature. But swimmers know that if they relax on the water it will prove to be miraculously buoyant; and writers know that a succession of little strokes on the material nearest them—without any pre-judgments about the specific gravity of the topic or the reasonableness of their expectations—will result in creative progress. Writers are persons who write; swimmers are (and from teaching a child this summer I know how hard it is to persuade a reasonable person of this)—swimmers are persons who relax in the water, let their heads go down, and reach out with ease and confidence.

My impulse now is to strengthen my case—or to reveal its weakness—by presenting two considerations. The first is example, some simple, natural procedure in writing; and the second is a consideration of how even the most simple, natural construction balloons into complexity when viewed in our usual way of analyzing a piece of literature. My converging effect, you understand, is to show that the writing is simple, if it is done by the swimming-in-itself technique; but that in analyzing the writing we can make it appear almost impossibly difficult.

First—the simple piece of writing. Doodling around one morning, I found myself with the aimless clause "While she was talking." This set of words led me to add to it, by a natural dog-paddling impulse, a closure for the construction; I wanted to have something be happening—just anything. I put down "a bear happened along." I remembered the bears we had seen at Banff—swaggering bears, dangerous and advertised as such, but valued. They were violent, or potentially so; they were protected by British laws. I began to put together phrases from that trip to Banff, from that set of impressions; the result was a poem, which appeared in *The Saturday Review*. Here it is—the simple, even poverty-stricken phrasing of it. Where I could not think of anything new to say, I repeated:

THE WOMAN AT BANFF

While she was talking a bear happened along, violating
every garbage can. Shaking its loose, Churchillian,
V for victory suit, it ripped up and ate
a greasy "Bears Are Dangerous" sign.

While she was talking the trees above signalled—
"Few," and the rock back of them—"Cold."
And while she was talking a moose—huge, black—
swam that river and faded off winterward,

Up toward the Saskatchewan.

"The Woman at Banff" and "B.C." are from TRAVELING THROUGH THE DARK by William Stafford. Copyright 1961, 1962 by William Stafford. Reprinted with the permission of Harper & Row, Publishers, Incorporated.

When I look at this, it appears to move inevitably; and I see that my failure of invention—about describing the woman—has turned into the main invention; she has become demonstrably talkative. Turning from further enticements—say,

the rich offering of syllables in "Saskatchewan"—I cite one other short sample, a form so elementary that I hardly know how to apologize enough for it. One morning, doodling, trying to write before I could think, I put down, "The seed that met water . . ." Of course, this kind of meeting is potential, in a small way, and my next move was to crawfish back from that potential, even while allowing it to exist, by saying that the seed that met water "spoke a little name." By this time I was in retreat, and I give you the poem, mostly just a little evasion, or excursion, then a payoff.

B. C.

The seed that met water spoke a little name.

(Great sunflowers were lording the air that day;
this was before Jesus, before Rome; that other air
was readying our hundreds of years to say things
that rain has beat down on over broken stones
and heaped behind us in many slag lands.)

Quiet in the earth a drop of water came,
and the little seed spoke: "Sequoia is my name."

Shrugging off for a moment a hunch that my own writing may be too disquietingly relevant to this point about simplicity (for there are disturbing implications, perhaps), I turn to my second of the converging points—how complex the writing can be when viewed from outside, when analyzed. If a person looks at a group of words he can find ideas, sound patterns, all kinds of involuted accomplishments. They are there; human beings are so marvelous in their thinking and in their analyzing that there is no end to the complexity of what can be discovered. This complexity is our opportunity and our triumph: it is not at all my intention to belittle either the existence or the discovery of these complexities. My point is a slightly different one. I want to plead for the ease of finding and expressing these patterns, these accomplishments which come naturally to the mind. I propose that we start with the assumption that people, even the shallowest ones, do have ideas: ideas spring from motion, and the mind is always in motion. Just as the swimmer does not have a succession of handholds hidden in the water, but instead simply sweeps that yielding medium and finds it hurrying him along, so the writer passes his attention through what is at hand, and is propelled by a medium too thin and all-pervasive for the perceptions of nonbelievers who try to stay on the bank and fathom his accomplishment.

Take some aspect of technique as an example. For a non-swimmer—a non-writer, I mean—it might seem that part of the effort of forming a poem derives from having to locate certain reinforcing sounds; to be firm about this, let us assume that the sounds needed are rhyme sounds. Maybe the writer is to move along—duh-dah, duh-dah, duh-dah, June; duh-dah, duh-dah,duh-dah, Moon. Attention becomes focused on the rhymes. Writing, however, depends to a large extent on a kind of attention the opposite of that alerted by rhyme-search. Maybe it would help to assume something like this:—for the writer (prose or poetry) all words rhyme; that is, all sounded words are more like each other than any word is like silence. You start from an assumption of relation, and your experience with the language is a

continuous experience with more or less similar sounds. You are always modulating along in sound. The writer and the speaker always live in one big chime. And of course this felt relation to the language consists of more than just sound-relations: syllables, aside from their sound, just in their associations in other words, have character, have cousins, enemies, checker patterns, figure-eight twists; and larger units have implications beyond their literal statements: 2 plus 2 equals 4 becomes a political statement—I believe it is still a Republican statement, though I may be missing some new developments these days. Anyway, the writer works from close similarities; he is buoyed by millions of slight influences. No analysis is ever complex enough to exhaust the potential in the language of any writer, of any human being; but on the other hand no act of writing when considered from the inside is ever anything but natural, for the writer, the person who writes, who is led by the end of whatever golden string he happens to pick up, and sustained by the self—his own appreciative self—which judges him. To glimpse how much more pervasive than simple rhyme are the influences which come to bear in an actual passage, consider the writhing potentials, neither rhyme nor not rhyme, in something as natural an expression for Milton as this, when he herded the language ahead of him, saying and biting at once, and launched at the enemy: "Avenge, O Lord, Thy slaughtered saints, whose bones/Lie scattered . . ."

A person writes by means of that meager but persistent little self he has with him all the time. He does not outflank his ignorance by intensive reading in composition class; he does not become brilliant about constructions by learning the history of the language. He is a certain weight of person, relying on the total feeling he has for experience. Consider some implications for teaching and for conversing about teaching. You know how often students bring something to you, saying, "I don't know whether this is really good, or whether I should throw it in the wastebasket." The assumption is that one or the other choice is the right move. No. Almost everything we say or think or do—or write—comes in that spacious human area bounded by something this side of the sublime and something above the unforgivable. We must accustom ourselves to talking without orating, and to writing without achieving "Paradise Lost." We must forgive ourselves and each other much, in our writing and in our talking. We must abjure the "I wrote it last night and it looked good, but today I see it is terrible" trope. When you write, simply tell me something. Maybe you can tell me how we should live.

For Kit, it was easy—she knew, and I can receive again the content, the pattern, the beginnings of a wonderful turbulence in her little dogpaddling toward great expression, as the two of us kept awake that night, coming through the Coast Range:

We'd have a old car, the kind that gets flat tires, but inside would be wolfskin . . .

COMING IN THE MAY ISSUE. A bold series of exercises for increasing compositional skill, based upon principles discovered in linguistic study, by Kenneth L. Pike of the University of Michigan.

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